TRANSCRIPT—JOHNNY F. BAXTER

BILTMORE VILLAGE ORAL HISTORIES

Narrator: Johnny Franklin Baxter

Interviewer: Mary Hyde

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Abstract: Mary Hyde interviewed Johnny F. Baxter, African American historian, on October 24, 1988. Baxter discusses the history of the YMI (Young Men's Institute) and the preservation of cemeteries in Shiloh, Kenilworth, and South Asheville.

Note: This recording is part of a collection of oral history interviews conducted for the Biltmore Village Historic Museum in the 1980s and 1990s, which were donated to Buncombe County Special Collections at Pack Memorial Public Library in 2010.

Mary Hyde: October 24th, 1988.

Johnny Baxter: [Giving directions] Forest Hill, right? Forest Hill. Make a left here. This is Forest Hill. You follow Forest Hill down to—Forest Hill, it's a shortcut. This is Forest Hill as far as—you can follow Forest Hill all around, but

this is out the way. This is the most direct way here. Follow Forest Hill down to what is known as—

Mary Hyde: Okay.

Johnny Baxter: There is a road, come down, this is the left. Make a left. Come down here. All this Wyoming Road right on around Harrison and Church over here on this corner. Church right here. Church, just keep right on around. And the second street, one street turned just away to the left to keep going. Another one turn, I guess this is Dalton here. This is the one that puts you right into the cemetery. Dalton Street.

Mary Hyde: Now what about, I have been told there was an old cemetery, basically in Biltmore Forest where Cedar Cliff is. Well, before Biltmore Forest it was the Shiloh Cemetery.

Johnny Baxter: That's right.

Mary Hyde: And that one got moved. How long had that Shiloh cemetery been there in the old location, and when did they move?

Johnny Baxter: We had to move, I think around 1900, something like that. Maybe a little before that. Vanderbilt was the one that had to move it and he's the one that built a church out there for the Blacks. I don't exactly what year that was between 1895, 1898, something like that.

Mary Hyde: But that Shiloh Cemetery isn't as old as this one here up on Dalton?

Johnny Baxter: No.

Mary Hyde: How old is this one? How old do you think this one dates back? The one in Kenilworth?

Johnny Baxter: The one in Kenilworth that goes back to shortly after the Revolution.

Mary Hyde: Really?

Johnny Baxter: A lot of these Civil War buildings buried out there with the gas on in that cemetery out there [inaudible] the Revolution.

Mary Hyde: Well now, Emily Queen said that she thought that in back of Newton School.

Johnny Baxter: Who?

Mary Hyde: Emily who works at Smith McDowell?

Johnny Baxter: [Inaudible.]

Mary Hyde: Yeah, little girl. Now she said that in back of Newton School in that cemetery is William Wallace McDowell, from the McDowells. But she said that she thought some of his slaves were buried right in back of there. So that's why I thought there was a Black cemetery right in back of Newton School.

Johnny Baxter: Well, some Blacks were buried there but it wasn't termed the Black cemetery at that time. But there are some Blacks in that cemetery, like the slaves of certain people. They allowed them to bury their slaves as close to them as possible. And some of the masters who requested that their slaves be buried [inaudible] plot here, plot there, his wife would be here, and the children, slaves would be joining. If the master didn't request that, they'd take them to this Black cemetery. So there are some Black people buried in that Newton cemetery.

Mary Hyde: Now is it the cemetery up on Dalton that they're trying so hard to renovate and to fix it? Is that the one that George—

Johnny Baxter: George Avery.

Mary Hyde: —is working?

Johnny Baxter: Not George Avery, George Gibson.

Mary Hyde: Gibson. I'm sorry. I know George. I work at the Red Cross. So George and Louise I knew from there, and I knew that he had been doing a lot of work out there.

Johnny Baxter: Gibson and I and two other fellows who worked all last summer cleaning up the place, cutting down trees, clearing away shrubs, the old brush and—

Mary Hyde: He's a hard worker.

Johnny Baxter: We did a considerable amount of work, got the place looking halfway decent so we could get him out of it. Then my wife, she suffered this stroke and I couldn't, I had to stay home and take care of her. So I had to give up my helping George Gibson with that night . I called him about, I guess, three weeks ago and he said—

[Audio interruption]

—met much since he and I, we were the ones that kept it going. We would get in touch with the other guys and let them know that we were going to be out there on a Saturday, and sometimes we'd have two other person beside, but George Gibson and myself, we were always there. Two guys [inaudible]

Mary Hyde: But if they didn't, you were always there.

Johnny Baxter: George and myself, we kept it going. But after my wife suffered her stroke I had to give up my working there. And I haven't been out there in two or three months.

Mary Hyde: Now is that a fenced, locked cemetery?

Johnny Baxter: No it's not. It was a fence at one time but the fence is falling down and that sort of thing. I remember picking up the fence post, [inaudible] but the fence itself is gone.

Mary Hyde: Well now, what about this cemetery on Sweeten Creek at West Chapel? Is that Sweeten Creek coming up, Sweeten Creek, from this—?

Johnny Baxter: You talking about Sunset Cemetery? I believe that what it is.

Mary Hyde: Is that what it is?

Johnny Baxter: Mm-hmm, yeah, I believe that's Sunset.

Mary Hyde: Now, is that a real new cemetery?

Johnny Baxter: Yeah, it's Sunset. Go up Sweeten Creek Road and make that left, make a left turn up on the hill, you're at Sunset. It's relatively new. It's not as old as the one in Kenilworth. The one in Kenilworth is the oldest, one of the oldest cemeteries.

Mary Hyde: That's going back to 1790 or right after the Revolution.

Johnny Baxter: Yeah, that's right.

So it's a really historic cemetery. You have all these slaves there, and their families. George Avery who would [inaudible] clean [inaudible] this headstone. He and his wife were working the last time I was out there. These places deteriorated so fast. You go out there this week, and go out there two or three weeks later, the graves have sunk a considerable amount since you were last there, depending on the weather amount, depending on the rain, you get more sinking, sinking.

Mary Hyde: Well, are there headstones on them or not?

Johnny Baxter: Some of them.

Mary Hyde: Are they all sandstones wearing off?

Johnny Baxter: Some of the headstones are falling down. You have to dig them up. And last time I was out there I remember two, three headstones had fallen and was covered up and I dug. I saw there was stones over there. I removed the dirt so I could get an idea of what's there, cleaned them up. And right there I remember one of the names was Clara Gray. Clara Gray. The headstone had fallen over, but the base was still there. But the upper part had fallen down and was just covered over.

Mary Hyde: Have they, have you done any rubbings to try to get the headstones?

Johnny Baxter: I had a steel brush and some detergent-like stuff to just help clean up the headstone bits. [inaudible] piece of wool [inaudible] squeaky clean [inaudible]

Mary Hyde: No, what I meant was how like they do in England where you put a piece of paper on it and chalk and try to transfer it so that you—you haven't done? Now were you saying that the YMI you were going to try to do a program or something for the YMI on the cemeteries?

Johnny Baxter: The YMI and the cemeteries are the two most historic properties in Asheville when it comes to Blacks. YMI came from George Vanderbilt in

1893. And that was the making of the Blacks in Asheville. From that point on, Asheville started to stand out, especially for Black Asheville. People from Asheville were supposed to be more intelligent and they were! More businesslike. That was all from Vanderbilt. So the Blacks in Asheville had a good record.

Mary Hyde: I've seen articles on the colored kindergarten that Vanderbilt put in, and the maid school.

Johnny Baxter: He had a kindergarten, had 36 Black kids in this kindergarten. Also had a domestic school for teenagers, teenage girls [inaudible]

Mary Hyde: Now was that him, or his wife? Who was the—

Johnny Baxter: Vanderbilt himself, he was interested in moving. He went there and taught in the kindergarten and the domestic school for the teenage girls. He spent a lot of time in that, you know, project. And he made a quote, and said his experience with the YMI, he said it was one of the most rewarding experiences he had ever had and he enjoyed every moment of it. Now this was a quote from Vanderbilt himself. He really enjoyed working with those Black children, teaching, and those Black young girls, 14, 12 to 15. But the YMI and the making of Black Asheville. That's what got it on the National Register of Historic Places, the part it played in the community right there. Because everything that happened in the Black community

happened, really started out in the community, up in the auditorium of the YMI.

Mary Hyde: Do you have the old plans for the YMI, or pictures that are—

Johnny Baxter: I got it all.

Mary Hyde: Have you? I've never seen any.

Johnny Baxter: I got the first board of directors from after it came from George Vanderbilt in 1906.

Mary Hyde: Oh. When it was no longer run by the church?

Johnny Baxter: That's right, that's when he sold it to the Black people. And they had this board of directors in 1906, and some of the more popular Black leaders in Asheville were on that board of directors. They had this Dr. Dusenbury, he was a great Presbyterian minister and he built two churches here. And he's the one negotiating between Vanderbilt and the Black ministers, that had put himself and the Negro community to talk with Vanderbilt. And he decided to sell it.

Mary Hyde: Why?

Johnny Baxter: He gave Black people the first choice. If you Black people buy the building, I'll sell it to you $10,000. If not, I going to put on the market 15,000. So.

Mary Hyde: I had read it had cost 35 originally.

Johnny Baxter: 32. Cost him 32,000 to build.

Mary Hyde: I've never quite known. Why did he build, I have heard two different things. Why did he build the YMI? Was there YMI in New York? Was he familiar with the YMI movement in New York?

Johnny Baxter: It wasn't a YMI in New York.

Mary Hyde: Well I meant was there a colored YMCA and—

Johnny Baxter: Colored could not participate in the YMCA program at that time.

Mary Hyde: I meant was there a segregation?

Johnny Baxter: That's why he decided to build this YMI, because he felt the Blacks is supposed to have the same opportunities to get a Christian education just like the whites got from the YMCA, which Blacks couldn't belong to it at the time. So he said Black men and boys should have the same opportunity since they can't go to participate in the YMCA program, I'll help build a building whereby they can do that and see that they be exposed to Christian education and that sort. So that's why he built the YMI in the first place to serve Black men and young men and boys the same way that the whites YMCA was severing Black men from the white men and white boys. So after he built the (indecipherable 19:04), he put on Young Men's institute and for short, the YMI.

Mary Hyde: Did it also provide sleeping accommodations for single men?

Johnny Baxter: Yes. He had like dormitories and baths and all that sort of thing.

Mary Hyde: Somewhere I had read that it was, he had built it because some of the people coming in to work on the estate couldn't get housing. But it seemed too late for that. He'd already got his estate all built.

Johnny Baxter: That wasn't the main reason. The main reason was what I just told you; the Black community, boys of Asheville, should have access to the same learning, that the white boys, the community were getting through the YMCA. Of course a lot of the Blacks that were working for him did come from other places. New York for example, he was providing people working for him. He was thinking about the Black people who were already here in Asheville. You know, he had about 700 Blacks working. Yeah, about seven, between seven and 800 Black people working for him along with the whites. In all, he had 3,000 employees on that, working on that project and he got out there and mingled with them every day and that's how he found out the Blacks didn't have the access and he could tell it talking to them, they weren't as intelligent at the whites. He felt if they had the same opportunities as the whites did, they would be as intelligent. So that's when he decided to, build this building, and then he had a Black man working for him that he brought from the West Indies to do certain jobs for him. And this Black man, he was fairly well educated. He had a doctors from Oxford, Oxford University in—

Mary Hyde: Who was this?

Johnny Baxter: George Stephens. He was working for Vanderbilt and gave the idea to do this thing. He talked him into it and when he first started talking to him about it, he had been thinking about it, thinking on it, but he never had given it any real serious thought. After this fellow he brought here to do certain research for him, and he started looking at it the way he looked at it, he decided a good thing and what do

Mary Hyde: Now I knew that there was a Black man. Oh he was Francis Owen's father-in-law. He worked for Mr. MacKeney—Billy Logan. Does that name register with you?

Johnny Baxter: Billy Logan.

Mary Hyde: Billy Logan.

Johnny Baxter: Well I know the Logans and they all lived out what they call South Asheville in Kenilworth.

Mary Hyde: Well, Mrs. Herring and I had gone to see Francis Owen.

Johnny Baxter: Francis Owen. She lived not too far from me.

Mary Hyde: No, I'm talking—must be Frank Owen. I'm sorry, the minister. Frank. Okay. His wife I think was the daughter of this Billy Logan.

Johnny Baxter: Yes, that's right. She was a Logan.

Mary Hyde: But he was telling me that this Billy Logan worked for like his general manager, Mr. Mc. And that he did some of the buying and when this street was built for the new Shiloh that it was built by Vanderbilt to replace the old Shiloh.

Johnny Baxter: Well the Owen—

Mary Hyde: Sylvester.

Johnny Baxter: Yes, Sylvester Owens, he worked for Vanderbilt. He was in charge of the flower gardens at the Vanderbilt mansion for years. He retired from there. He's still living, but his memory's not what it used to be. I made any number of attempts to get with him and try to get some information around but he won't talk about it. Mention Vanderbilt, and he just freezes up, absolutely refuses to talk about it, and I never did quite understand that.

Mary Hyde: What about now you were telling me about this George Stephens. I have never heard his name. Do you have pictures of the early YMI or pictures of the colored kindergarten or anything like that? I have seen one picture of the kindergarten somewhere.

Johnny Baxter: I don't have any pictures of the kindergarten. All I know that it existed, it started in the church, Episcopal Church, All Soul's Episcopal Church, which Vanderbilt built. He had this started in this church that completed he needed. But he continued to go in there every day and talk with me.

Mary Hyde: Had you interviewed anybody who knew him or knew it after he died? Did his wife continue her interest or not too much or once it became separate?

Johnny Baxter: When he passed she didn't have any, because he had divested himself of the building as long as he was living. He still kept up with, it was no longer his operation. He built in 1893, he operated the building to 1905 from his own treasury.

Mary Hyde: So have you got some of those records that show?

Johnny Baxter: Yes. Anything that has to do with the early history of YMI.

Mary Hyde: The reason I'm interested is because I have seen a record book, an accounts book for the old Biltmore Industries until 1909, 1910. And it shows that every month he's put $363 into that training school too. He was a very good man.

Johnny Baxter: He was one of the greatest. and I think how close Asheville came to not having him and I just can't figure what Asheville would be like had it not been for him, from a white standpoint or Black standpoint. He actually did more to bring the races together than any man, any other millionaire that had come to Asheville. We had quite a few millionaires come to Asheville. E.W. Grove for example. But none made the mark that Vanderbilt made. Most of them were feathering their own nests, you

know, so to speak. But Vanderbilt was interested in people and they were interested in money.

Mary Hyde: How did the ministers get enough money? Was there a strong Black community in 1905, '06 that they could get enough money to buy it?

Johnny Baxter: The leaders in 1905 were so far ahead of the leaders we have today, you wouldn't believe it. That's right. They were real leaders.

Mary Hyde: Good men, huh?

Johnny Baxter: This man, I talked about these two churches, this Presbyterian minister, he had a church just across the street from the YMI building. He built it from the ground. A beautiful church built one. What was known as Victoria. Have you heard?

Mary Hyde: I know where Victoria is. He had a church up there?

Johnny Baxter: Yes, he had a church in Victoria.

Mary Hyde: What part?

Johnny Baxter: Well, the main part.

Mary Hyde: I mean going toward AB Tech.

Johnny Baxter: Going toward AB Tech. Black street.

Mary Hyde: Now I know Harriet Haith who lives back up there,

Johnny Baxter: Harriet Haith lives on Oakland Road—

Mary Hyde: Which is—

Johnny Baxter: —a part of it. That was a part of Victoria in the early days.

Mary Hyde: Now Harriet's a friend of mine. I know her and I've been in that house, so I remember that story, but I didn't know there was a Black church up in Victoria. Is it still there?

Johnny Baxter: No, This minister, the person that was the minister at that time, he was one of the great minister at that time.

Mary Hyde: Yeah, you mentioned it on the tape.

Johnny Baxter: Anyway, it was the minister, the largest Black church, Baptist church in Asheville, which is Mount Zion, the minister of that church at that time was Reverend J. R. Nelson. He was the greatest Black minister ever to come to Asheville. J. R. Nelson and [inaudible] and the minister of his chapel. He was a very [inaudible], you see? And the minister of Saint Matthias Church, that was the committee that negotiating with this committee minister, they made plans to raise this $10,000. Back then that was a lot of money, $10,000. Now, you'd never do it, But they raised that $10,000. That minister that I mentioned, negotiating and signing the deed to the property. I have the 49 men that put the whole, that came from Vanderbilt and set it up at the YMI building.

Mary Hyde: They underwrote it.

Johnny Baxter: Yeah, they underwrote it, but that's not the name, the name of those—

Mary Hyde: Were they board, the executive board maybe?

Johnny Baxter: No, they were the ones that put the whole thing together. Incorporated. They incorporated 49 and I have the names of those 49, those leading Black men of Asheville. I know you heard of Dr. Lee.

Mary Hyde: Oh yes.

Johnny Baxter: W.S. Lee, his name is, he's one of the 49 incorporators along with the well leading innovation that consisted of the doctors, the teachers, and [inaudible].

Mary Hyde: Was it a strong business community down there on Eagle Street or not at that time?

Johnny Baxter: Yes. Very strong. And sometimes I wonder how they did it. Every building in that immediate vicinity was taken, was occupied by Black businesses. Go down there now, you can count on the one hand. And I wonder about that progress, what has actually happened to the Black business people?

Mary Hyde: It's like what's happened to the business people downtown, period.

Johnny Baxter: Period. Yeah. Back then, Blacks, every building built there was occupied by a Black business.

Mary Hyde: Now when the YMI project was done, three, five years ago, I was down there one time and I thought that that main room in front was going to be a museum, or a cultural center, and now it's that business, those front doors.

Johnny Baxter: Oh yeah, I know the way the drug store used to be, right in the corner. That's always been ground floor building space has mostly been for commercial. Public library building for years. And the drugstore, has always been a drugstore. [Inaudible.]

Mary Hyde: They're going to push us out of here. Well, this is wonderful. I would love sometime to see what you have.

Johnny Baxter: I'm sure you're busy now. This Preservation Foundation of North Carolina, which I'm a member of the board of advisors, we just had our annual meeting in Chapel Hill a couple weeks ago, and we have a drive to get 500 new members. And it's really working so we can—

[END OF RECORDING, 00:37:09]